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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a World Wide Web strategic planning process at the East Tennessee State University (ETSU) College of Medicine (COM). The process began when a Web Strategic Planning Committee was charged by the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs to craft a comprehensive plan for development of the COM Web site, because the existing Web site did not serve the needs of students, faculty, staff, or the community. Elements of existing internal documents served as the foundation for developing the strategic plan. The resulting framework outlined guiding principles, current conditions, planning assumptions, and strategies. Strategies were aligned with the COM mission and goals. Recommendations and a framework for implementation were delineated. The resulting living document serves as a guide to help align the COM mission, goals, and values with the information technology infrastructure. It soon became evident that the original charge had broader implications affecting areas such as leadership, instruction, resources, training and support, content, quality control, and technology integration. Because these are common concerns in academia, this strategic planning process may serve as a framework for other institutions. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/MES)

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Creating a Framework for Academic Web Strategic Planning

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Abstract: This paper describes a Web strategic planning process at the James H. Quillen College of Medicine (COM) at East Tennessee State University (ETSU). The process began when a Web Strategic Planning Committee was charged by the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs to craft a comprehensive plan for development of the COM Website, because the existing Website did not serve the needs of students, faculty, staff, or the community. Elements of existing internal documents served as the foundation for developing the strategic plan. The resulting framework outlines guiding principles, current conditions, planning assumptions, and strategies. Strategies were aligned with the COM mission and goals. Recommendations and a framework for implementation were delineated. The resulting living document serves as a guide to help align the COM mission, goals, and values with the information technology infrastructure. It soon became evident that the original charge had broader implications affecting areas such as leadership, instruction, resources, training and support, content, quality control, and technology integration. Because these are common concerns in academia, this strategic planning process may serve as a framework for other institutions.

Introduction

Who We Are

East Tennessee State University (ETSU) is a regional comprehensive university of approximately 12,000 students and has a medical school with 250 medical students and 270 residents. The College is dedicated to excellence in medical, biomedical, and health education, research, and the improvement of health care in northeast Tennessee and the surrounding Appalachian region. The James H. Quillen College of Medicine (COM) is one of the last six medical schools established in the U.S.; the first class graduated in 1982. According to **U.S. News & World Report** (April 2001), the College tied for fourth place among the top medical schools in the nation for rural medical education.

College administrators had been aware for some time that the existing Website did not serve the needs of the students, faculty, staff, or the community. In addition, a change in administration and the departure of the sole Website administrator resulted in a chaotic state of affairs for the site. It was in this new environment that administration appointed the COM Web Strategic Planning committee and charged it with the task of producing a strategic plan. This task was to be accomplished within the timeframe of two months. The committee consisted of two representatives from the Office of Information Technology, two faculty members, one library representative and three staff members (two from the department responsible for the

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COM Website). Since the committee appointees had little strategic planning experience, one of the first things to be done was to educate the members about the strategic planning process.

Strategic Planning

Strategic planning provides a means for an organization to adapt its services and activities to meet changing needs in the environment. A strategic plan is a framework that guides choices to improve and restructure programs and management, and to evaluate an institution's progress. The planning process provides direction, envisions the organization's future, and examines values, the situation, and the environment. It is a tool to align the goals developed by the planning committee with the mission and goals of the organization. A strategic plan decreases in value unless the follow-up process includes developing an implementation plan and making provisions for evaluation and continuous improvement (Fig. 1).

This document outlines a framework for creating both an academic Website strategic plan and an implementation plan. It also emphasizes the need for a formalized evaluation and continuous improvement process.

Figure 1. Strategic Planning Process

The Strategic Plan

The original interpretation of the charge was to develop a strategic plan for the COM Website. The process began by painting a vision and establishing goals for the Website, outlining guiding principles, current conditions and planning assumptions, aligning committee goals with the College mission and goals, and recommending the development of an implementation plan, as well as a process for annual evaluation and continuous improvement (Fig. 2).

Painting the Vision and Establishing Goals

The first step was to conduct a brainstorming session, during which the committee began to build a vision by articulating a desired future state of the Website and related technologies at the College. This session resulted in a vision for the Website to become a core tool to facilitate communication. The Website should enhance the ability of the College to perform its mission, reflect its image, and increase visibility by serving constituent needs. The committee goal was to create a Website that supports the COM mission.

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First, potential users were identified. The internal COM audience was recognized to include students, administration, faculty, and staff. The external audience was identified as prospective students and employees, the local community, business partners, government agencies, and funding sources. Second, the purpose of the Website was defined, which is to educate physicians and biomedical scientists, inform both internal and external constituents, recruit faculty, staff, students, and funding sources, and nurture constituents. Third, the purpose of the charge was discussed and problem areas were outlined. Simultaneously, a literature search was conducted. While some literature exists about strategic planning at the university and information technology levels, the search revealed that little applied to academic Websites.

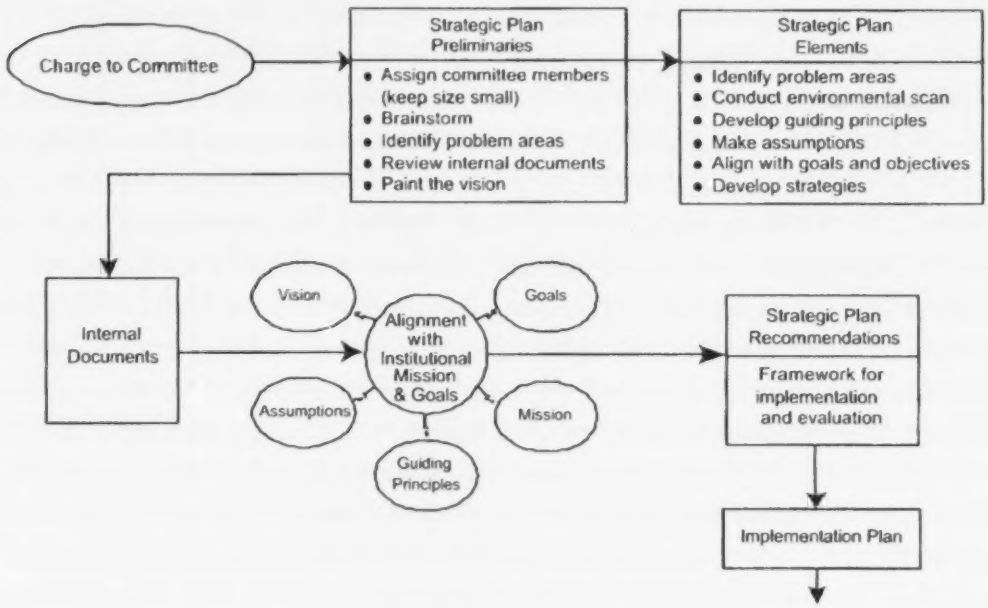

Figure 2. World Wide Web Strategic Planning Process

Guiding Principles and Assumptions

Guiding principles are fundamental value statements that govern decisions and actions. These principles serve as a framework upon which infrastructure is built. At the COM, the goal is to build the framework on the acquisition and consistent use of technology throughout the College. As an example, one of the committee's guiding principles is to build and maintain a high-quality Web infrastructure that supports learning, teaching, research, community outreach, and the goals and objectives of the institution.

Planning assumptions outline the environment in which an organization exists. The committee scanned the COM environment and evaluated the state of the Website, as well as the organization of resources within the College. This environmental scan resulted in assumptions about students, administration, faculty, staff, the community culture, resources, and technology that guided decisions and recommendations.

Developing Strategies

For the Website to be an effective tool to deliver information, instruction, and other resources, strategies must be aligned with institutional planning efforts and committee goals. The committee used internal documents, including strategic plans for the University, the College, and the Office of Information Technology, to align

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established goals and objectives with those developed by the committee. Strategies were developed to attain those goals (Tab. 1). Finally, prerequisites for implementing the strategies were identified.

To Enable Efficient, Effective, And Meaningful Use Of The Web To:	Web Planning Committee Strategies	Prerequisites
COM Goal #3: Promote an academic environment that nurtures research and scholarly activity **Committee Goals:** 3.1 Internal Nurturing	3.1.1 Improve access to library resources 3.1.2 Provide a searchable database for ongoing research and clinical interests 3.1.3 Provide a Web platform for collaborative consultation 3.1.4 Provide a Web reference room with appropriate links, forms, databases, and templates	? Administrative support to allocate resources ? Need standardized interface

Table 1. Strategic Plan Example

The Implementation Plan

An implementation plan is a path to the future that assesses and analyzes the needs of the institution and its constituents. The plan prioritizes core issues that are unique to the institution. The implementation plan recognizes that the Website is a critical component in the strategic planning and budgeting process.

Once the strategic plan was accepted by administration, the implementation planning process began. The committee had six months to complete the task. The implementation plan (Fig. 3) was developed by:

1. Interviewing constituents to determine their concerns
2. Analyzing information from the interviews
3. Prioritizing action items
4. Identifying resources and making recommendations

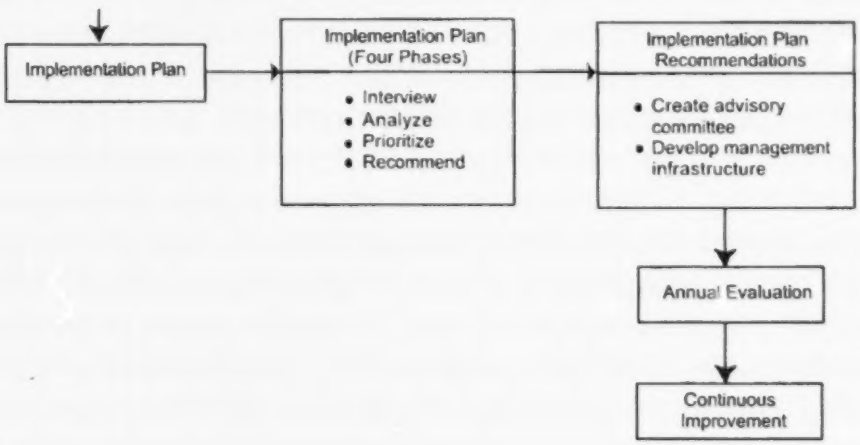

Figure 3. World Wide Web Implementation Planning Process

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The traditional method for soliciting input is to develop a survey instrument. Because of time constraints, however, personal interviews were determined to be more efficient for gathering information. The interview audience was divided into two tiers. Tier one included academic and critical administrative units; tier two, special programs. Second tier interviews were postponed because first tier concerns were so consistent. When the information was analyzed, the committee discovered that problems involved more than the Website. Major concerns fell into three broad areas—user-related (delivery of instruction, collaboration, marketing, and public relations), Web-related (training and Web design), and technical-related (network infrastructure and use of databases for dynamic delivery of information). Consistent issues emerged as core topics; for example, there is a need to develop an information technology organizational infrastructure and to promote more effective internal communication. The committee prioritized core topics and made specific recommendations to help solve the identified problems.

Lessons Learned

Many lessons were learned during this process. For instance, non-experts in strategic planning are capable of creating a Website strategic plan for the institution. A little wheel spinning initially is acceptable or even desirable—working through initial struggles permits members to get to know each other and establish a productive, collaborative relationship. Other lessons learned were:

- Keep the committee small, but represent the constituents
- Stay flexible to accommodate the unexpected
- Set a timeframe
- Examine the successes and mistakes of other institutions
- Establish benchmarks prior to the evaluation process

Conclusion

The strategic plan for the ETSU College of Medicine technology infrastructure is not a rigid blueprint, but a living document to help align the mission, goals, and values with the Website strategy. The effectiveness of any strategic plan is not only implementation of the plan, but the extent to which goals are met. Therefore, an annual evaluation process, based on established benchmarks will be proposed. Following evaluation, a formalized continuous improvement process should be implemented to provide the institution with a method to analyze progress and re-evaluate goals.

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